

The Social Pirates

Plot by George Bronson Howard, Novelization by Hugh C. Weir

The Fangs of the Tattler

STORY NELL

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8 THIS Miss Hartley—Mona Hartley?

The girl who had picked up the telephone transmitter gave a wondering affirmative to the question over the wire, noting that it was a woman's voice which had spoken—a voice which held a suggestion of hysteria.

"My name is Burton," continued the voice, "Mrs. Amos Burton. You don't know me, but I have heard of you and your friend, Miss Davenport, and I—I wish you could help me! I am in trouble, desperate trouble!" The hysteria in the speaker's voice was rising to a shrill crescendo. "Don't say you cannot. If you refuse me, I don't know what I shall do!"

Mona glanced at her watch. "If you will give me your address, Mrs. Burton, Miss Davenport and I will see you at once," she said briskly.

It was shortly after eleven o'clock when the hired motor of the two girls drew up before a handsome residence, set well back in a yard, on which wealth had lavished much attention. Mrs. Burton needed no urging to plunge into her story. Evidently it was the uppermost subject of her thoughts.

"I sent for you," she began, "because I need the services of someone upon whose discretion and honesty I can absolutely rely. If you read the newspapers you must know something of my married life, and my husband. The papers printed columns about us both at the time of our wedding. Mr. Burton is much older than myself, although we were both devoted to each other. But he is frightfully jealous, unreasonably so at times, for I swear that I have never given him cause to doubt my loyalty. And now—it looks as though circumstances had conspired against me, and that I shall be branded in his eyes as a designing creature, unworthy of his love, through absolutely no fault of my own."

"Go on, please," encouraged Mona. Mrs. Burton flushed. "To go back a short time in my life, I must tell you that before my marriage I was on rather good terms with George Allison, a young artist. In fact, had conditions been different, the affair might have developed more seriously. As it was, it was definitely at an end even before I received Mr. Burton's offer of marriage. You see, Mr. Allison ruined himself and his career with drugs, and about the time I became engaged, he disappeared utterly. A few months after my marriage, I received a letter from him dated from South America, saying he was very ill. Then another letter came, telling me he was in a critical condition, and asking if I could send him some money. Such an appeal, of course, would have destroyed any love for him, even if there had been any left, for it was easy enough to read between the lines of the ravages of his own dissipation. But I sent him some money, rather foolishly, perhaps—and then forgot the incident until yesterday."

She paused again, and continued more slowly and deliberately. "Yesterday afternoon I received a card from a man styling himself Almer Runkle, attorney, with a request for an interview on a vital subject. Reluctantly I received him and he horrified me with the announcement that my letters from George Allison were in the possession of a newspaper, and about to be published—unless I could raise enough money to buy them back. Of course, I thought he was shooting at random, but when I searched my desk I found that he had, indeed, spoken the truth, for all of my letters had been stolen."

Mona's face contracted grimly. "I see," she said grimly. "And what is the name of the enterprising newspaper in the case?" "The Tattler! Surely, you must know it. It has acquired a tremendous reputation by publishing the most sensational scandals of any paper in this section—a fact which no one but a person intimately acquainted in society could have known about. Everyone has suspected for months that The Tattler was being supplied with its material by someone being received into the best homes of the city—and there have been ugly rumors of scandal stories, even more sensational than those it has published, which were suppressed strangely at the last moment. When I received the proposition of the lawyer, Runkle, I could understand how this had been done, and that I was not the only victim which The Tattler had caught in its toils. He told me that he had happened to drop into the editorial offices of the newspaper quite by accident, and while there had seen the proofs of the article about me, which were to have been published in this week's issue. Knowing the injury which such a publication would be to me, he had prevailed upon the editor to hold up the article, as he expressed it, until he could see me—explaining that it would mean considerable loss to the paper's circulation to stop the publication of such a sensational story, and that if I were willing to make up this loss, he thought it possible to get back the letters for me. He told me that it might be arranged for five thousand dollars, and he is to call tomorrow for the money."

"And you had planned to give it to him?" asked Mary.

"I can't! I haven't got it! And there is no way I can raise it without carrying the whole wretched story to my husband."

"You say the letters were stolen from your private desk?" asked Mona, thoughtfully. "That fact, at least, should give us a base from which to work. Who besides yourself had access to the desk—and who knew the letters were there?"

"No one," said Mrs. Burton promptly. "But that is impossible," remonstrated the girl. "The thief must have known. And we must find the thief if we are to help you! Have you a maid?"

"Of course—but Mimi is quite above suspicion. I assure you. I would vouch for her devotion."

"Can we talk to her?" asked Mona.

A few minutes later Mona flung a half dozen searching queries to the demure maid, who met them all without so much as a change of color. In the end, Mona was forced to abandon the amateur inquiry, and giving a signal to Mary, arose reluctantly as Mrs. Burton dismissed the servant.

"I am afraid you are right about Mimi," said Mona, as she stood, surveying the room uncertainly. "She is either absolutely loyal and honest, or one of the most consummate actresses I have met."

As they passed through the hall, Mona caught a glimpse of Mimi's face watching them wonderingly. In the lower hall, Mona uttered a sudden exclamation, and started back to the stairs. "I have forgotten my purse," she said hurriedly. "I can get it, Mrs. Burton—thanks."

At the door of the boudoir, Mona hesitated a moment, and then stepped suddenly into the room. Mimi was rising from the telephone.

Mona flashed a quick glance, and saw that the girl was flushing uncomfortably.

"To whom were you phoning?" she asked abruptly.

Mimi tossed her head.

"And what does that matter to you?" Mona compressed her lips, and picked up her purse. "Nothing—perhaps!" she said, and walked down the stairs thoughtfully. In the lower hall, she faced Mrs. Burton decidedly.

"That maid of yours knows more about this affair than she has told us," she said. "With your permission, I would like to question her again."

"I am certain you are mistaken," said Mrs. Burton dubiously, "but if you are to help me, I suppose you must have your own way."

Again Mimi was summoned, and again she faced Mona's swiftly varied questions—this time meeting her interrogator with more assurance, as though realizing that she had her mistress's confidence to support her. In the end, Mona was obliged, as before to own herself defeated. With a shrug she watched the girl leave the room. A moment afterward the girls left the house.

Mona instructed the driver to stop at a drug store, and a few minutes later she returned to the machine with a packet of peculiar black

popular and a caller in all the best homes of town.

Mona smiled cryptically. "Doesn't your description tally exactly with the idea you gave me of the mysterious informant of The Tattler in Society? All but the financial standing of Mr. Wentworth—and perhaps his income may be largely bluff!"

Mrs. Burton frowned dubiously. "Of course, you may be right," she conceded. "After the revelation of Mimi's treachery, I could believe anything!" She turned on the maid angrily. "If it were not for Miss Davenport's promise of protection I would be tempted to turn you over to the police, myself!"

"You forget that you would have to tell them about—the letters!" retorted Mimi, sullenly.

Mrs. Burton stiffened. "Oh, what shall I do?" she moaned again, as the realization of her situation broke upon her. "Even if Mimi has told you what she did with my correspondence, how does it help us? How are we to get back the letters? And, remember, unless they can be returned to

with Mary as her secretary and Mimi as her maid, made a somewhat spectacular appearance at the Roanoke, one of the select hotels of the city, and was assigned to a suite, which only the most generous bank roll could have stood. The following day Mrs. Burton, who had been notified of the girl's assumed character, invited her to a tea, at which she was presented to a group of the city's socially and financially elect. Mona kept a sharp eye open for Reginald Wentworth, but that gentleman did not make an appearance.

The next morning found several invitations to various affairs in her mail, and at a theater party that evening she met for the first time the object of her plottings. Wentworth was a tall, well set up fellow in his early thirties, with certain grace of manner toward the fair sex, which had obviously won him many friends among women. He established himself at Mona's side, and the girl purposely made herself agreeable to him in a frank, open manner, which kept Wentworth with her for the better part of two acts.

On the following afternoon, Dick Carlton, registering as Raymond Daniels, of Seattle, sauntered into the Roanoke, and that evening he escorted Mona to another theater party, where he was duly presented to Mrs. Burton and her friends, including Wentworth, who showed none too great a relish when the stranger calmly appropriated the rich young Mrs. Douglas for the bulk of the evening. It was a part of Mona's plan to give the impression that she and Carlton were on terms of intimate flirtation, and she succeeded admirably.

Early in the following week she considered her preparations far enough advanced to proceed safely with the next step in her program. She called Mimi into their sitting-room, and instructed the maid to make an appointment with the man, Runkle, for the park that afternoon at two o'clock.

"Hold him there until Miss Hartley arrives with Mr. Carlton," directed Mona. "Give him any excuse necessary. Tell him that you see a way by which you can make capital out of my supposed indiscretions—anything to keep him occupied until Miss Hartley is ready."

Promptly at 2 o'clock, Mimi strolled to one of the park benches, overlooking the main driveway with Runkle.

"You say that this Mrs. Douglas is young, and pretty and rich?" asked Runkle.

"There is no doubt that—" Mimi broke off her sentence. A couple were strolling down the path, engaged in an angry dialogue. It was Mary and Carlton. As they reached the bench, on which Mimi and her companion were getting, Mary suddenly broke away from Carlton in a torrent of weeping denunciation.

"You are tired of me! You are throwing me over for her! I know what is in your heart! You shall regret it soon—very soon!" With that she tried to make a scornful toss of her pretty head, and staggered across to an empty bench.

"Perhaps it is better to have it over with," he called after her, lifting his hat with a flourish. "At any rate, you know the truth now!" Without a backward glance, he strolled back down the path, leaving the weeping girl alone on the bench. For a moment Mary sobbed convulsively, and then lifted her head—to discover that she was alone, and that Carlton had disappeared. She rose to her feet, glanced wildly about her, and hesitatingly walked to the lake. Apparently she was about to throw herself into the water. Runkle, with a muttered oath, sprang across and grasped her arm.

"None of that, young woman!" he snapped as Mary glared at him. "If he has thrown you over, there are far better ways of revenge than that."

Mary stared at him, as though not comprehending, while Mimi hovered discreetly in the background. At that moment the honk of an automobile horn sounded from the driveway, and the voice of Reginald Wentworth called across to Runkle.

"If you will wait here a moment," the latter said to Mary. "I should like to talk to you. And I think a little interview might be of profit to both of us."

Mary glanced quickly at Wentworth, who was watching the scene curiously from the car, and dropped back on her bench, indicating that she would wait. The opportune arrival of Wentworth was a real piece of luck.

When Runkle returned after a long talk with Wentworth, he brought that worthy back with him and then finally persuaded Mary to tell them the details of Mrs. Douglas's treachery to Mary and infidelity to her rich husband. Then, with Mary's consent, they agreed to make Mrs. Douglas pay for it through the medium of The Tattler.

Wentworth himself drove Mary home, and he seemed to enjoy the ride with his charming companion.

When Wentworth finally instructed the chauffeur to stop, at a point near the Roanoke, he

me intact, without their contents becoming known, I am ruined—ruined."

Mona patted her encouragingly on the shoulder. "Mimi is going to redeem herself by helping me to make the acquaintance of Messrs. Runkle and Wentworth—and unless I am more mistaken than I ever was before, I think I can promise you a gratifying report in the very near future!" To begin with, now that Mimi is out of your service, she is going to enter mine—for the time being."

She scribbled a card, and gave it to the hesitating maid. "I am trusting you absolutely! You will report to me this afternoon. If you so much as try to warn either Runkle or Wentworth of what has happened, I shall give you to the police—no matter what the results may be to Mrs. Burton!"

For a moment she and Mimi stared into each other's eyes—Mona coldly determined, and Mimi fluctuating between a sullen defiance and fear. In the end Mona's superior will won, and Mimi moved to the door.

"You will hear from me in the afternoon," she said.

"And now, Mrs. Burton," cried Mona, as the door closed behind the other, "you must do exactly as I tell you, if you expect me to be of any assistance to you. In the first place you must plead with the man, Runkle, for more time. Tell him anything you please—that you have to borrow the money or pawn your jewels—anything to gain time until I have a chance to act. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly," agreed Mrs. Burton.

Mona spent the remainder of the day in a silent, speculative study, from which Mary did not arouse her even when Mimi put in an appearance, faithful to her appointment. It was not until the two girls were preparing to retire for the night that Mona unburdened herself, and before she had spoken a dozen words, Mary realized that her friend's quick wit was beginning to see a solution of their problem.

"Dick Carlton is dining with us tomorrow, isn't he?" she asked.

"You mean we are dining with him," corrected Mary.

"I admit the error," smiled Mona. "Well, Dick is to enter our service for the time being. You are to be my confidential secretary and companion, and I am to be a rather flighty young married woman, with a rich husband in Seattle, and a generous allowance to spend as long as I behave myself. Do you begin to catch my drift?"

"And I am, of course, to sell information against you to Runkle for a story in The Tattler!" cried Mary.

"Not exactly. We'll determine that point later. Help me to choose a name for myself. Whose wife am I to be?"

"You want a name that sounds like money and respectability," said Mary reflectively. "Smith is too common. So is Jones. How about Douglas?"

"Splendid. Mrs. Douglas, of Seattle, on an excursion here to see the sights, and have a general good time, while Hubby is sticking close to the eternal grindstone to provide the wherewithal! Now, if our young friend, Dick, comes up to specifications I think we can consider the cast satisfactorily filled."

Dick Carlton, as the girls had confidently expected, entered into the spirit of their plans with a relish, and when Mona sketched the part he was to play—that of secretary to the husband and more than slightly in love with her—he accepted the role with alacrity, particularly the latter portion.

The next afternoon Mona, as Mrs. Douglas,



"I HAVE CAUGHT YOU RED-HANDED, MIMI!"

powder, which she exhibited triumphantly. Then they returned to the Burton house.

Mrs. Burton met them with a glance in which hope and bewilderment mingled. "Have you found anything?" she asked.

"I hope to—shortly," said Mona. "Have you an old envelope with your address?" she asked.

Carrying the envelope to the light, she dusted it with a portion of the black powder she had purchased. Mary gave a little cry as the impressions of four fingers and a thumb showed vaguely on the white paper.

"My finger prints," exclaimed Mona. "Now if you will kindly call Mimi again, Mrs. Burton, I think I can promise you some definite progress."

Mimi's gaze openly expressed defiance as she answered the ring.

"I am sorry to trouble you," said Mona, adopting a more conciliatory tone than she had used before. "Indeed, I am quite sure that I have wronged you in my suspicions, and I have called you in order to tell you before Mrs. Burton that I am very sorry if I have done you an injustice." She stepped forward, and in doing so, dropped her silver vanity box, which fell to the floor, almost at Mimi's feet. With a smile, the maid stooped and recovered it.

"Thank you," smiled Mona, holding the box carefully by its edge. "Oh, just a moment, please," she called as Mimi made a movement as though to leave. As the maid paused uncertainly, Mona carried the vanity box to the window, and dusted more of the black powder over its polished surface. Against the silver background appeared the imprint of the maid's fingers and thumb.

"Will you please give me that envelope of Mrs. Burton's?" Mona asked Mary. The other obeyed promptly, and Mona straightened with a cry of apparent satisfaction.

"I have caught you red-handed, Mimi!" she said cryptically. "Perhaps you have not heard of the wonderful evidence of human finger prints? It has been established that there is no more infallible witness than the tell-tale marks of the thief's own hand. This envelope—holding out that which Mrs. Burton had given her—revealed a peculiar set of finger prints. And now, producing the vanity box, 'I have another set of finger prints, which coincide exactly. As the envelope was recovered from Mrs. Burton's desk, there is only one course I can take. I must telephone for the police, and give you into custody on the charge of purloining documents of your employer. May I use your phone Mrs. Burton?"

The mistress stared as though dazed by the sudden development. For a moment Mimi stood, surveying her questioner with wide-eyed amazement. Then with a gasp she sprang forward and caught Mona's arm.

"No—no, not the police!" she wailed. "Anything but the police! I confess! I will tell you everything—but not the police!"

Mona's ingenious ruse had worked perfectly. The girl swiftly veiled her satisfaction and pretended to consider the maid's request.

"I don't know that you can help us—that we need your evidence," she said dubiously.

"Oh, but you do not know—you do not know all that. I can tell you," pleaded Mimi swiftly. "I can take you to the man who paid me the money for the letters, who—"

"You wretch!" cried Mrs. Burton, who now saw the other's duplicity. Mimi's tears redoubled.

"His name is Runkle, and he told me that he would pay me well for any information I could give him for his newspaper. But even he is not the man you want. He is only an agent. The real man is—"

"Who?" snapped Mona.

Mimi smiled craftily. "You promise me that I shall be protected—that I shall not suffer?"

"If you tell me the truth and keep faith with me," conceded Mona grudgingly.

"Very well, then. It is a promise. The man you want, who employed Runkle, is Reginald Wentworth."

Mrs. Burton gave a cry of incredulity.

"Impossible! Why, I know Mr. Wentworth well! He is above any such infamy. There would be no need for him to stoop to such methods to gain money, for he is rich in his own right,



CARLTON WAS FACING HIM WITH A DRAWN REVOLVER.

lingered in his good-byes, and forced her to consent to dine with him the next evening.

She drew a long breath as the car finally rolled away. Wentworth waving to her from the rear seat. She felt that she had conquered! With sparkling eyes she hurried to their apartment in the Roanoke, and excitedly poured out the details of the afternoon to the impatiently waiting Mona.

Three weeks passed three weeks of varying incidents. Mona's flirtation with Carlton, or young Daniels, as their new friends knew him, was

beginning to attract more than casual attention, and more than once Mona caught the calculating eye of Wentworth surveying them at the various affairs, where they chanced to meet. In the meantime, Mary's acquaintanceship with Reginald Wentworth was fast approaching a degree of intimacy. It was apparent to the girl that the man was genuinely attracted to her, and the topic of Mrs. Douglas, and the supposed young wife's indiscretions was discussed between them with a direct candor and speculation. But there was a vague, indefinable element of distrust, even yet in Wentworth's manner, which the girl was at a loss to understand until one evening when the two motored out to a restaurant on the outskirts of the city for a Bohemian dinner.

During the ride Wentworth carelessly toyed with his wallet, which he had drawn from his pocket to refer to a memorandum it contained. Suddenly he looked up at her, and tapping the wallet significantly, said: "Do you know that its contents are almost priceless to myself—and a certain very worried lady of society?"

Mary shook her head with a quizzical smile. "I dare say that the lady in question would redeem the half dozen letters in this wallet for a thousand apiece—and be grateful for the chance!"

The subject dropped, and it was not until Wentworth received a sudden telephone call during the course of the dinner, and excused himself that the conversation recurred to the girl. There by his plate was the wallet, where in his haste he had forgotten it! For a moment she hesitated, and then her hand reached out stealthily to appropriate it. The instinct that whispered her a swift warning she could not have explained, but she drew back hurriedly, leaving the wallet undisturbed. Was it not possible that Wentworth had laid a clever trap to test her? It was inconceivable that a man, accustomed to living by his wits, would be careless enough to leave a six thousand dollar weapon of blackmail conspicuously on a restaurant table! A moment later Wentworth sauntered back, and his glance told Mary that her suspicions had been justified.

With a low laugh he picked up the wallet, and turning it inside out, flung it back. It was empty!

"Please accept my apologies for doubting you!" he said in a low tone. "But I couldn't afford to take a chance—and if we are to play the game together, I must be absolutely certain that we are going to do it on the square!"

Mary paled. How near she had been to a hopeless, fatal betrayal!

When she rejoined Mona that night her mind was definitely made up. She would force the situation to a climax without further delay. She saw now that every day might hold fresh pitfalls and new dangers. So they chose that same night for their little drama.

It was nearly noon when Mary called up Wentworth at his apartment, and asked hurriedly for an immediate interview. When he met her an hour later she imparted to him the intelligence that Mrs. Douglas and Carlton, after the theater that night, were to be together in the former's apartment at the Roanoke.

"And I have a plan which I think will give us what we have been scheming for," ended Mary enthusiastically. For several moments she spoke swiftly and nervously, and at the end Wentworth caught her hand enthusiastically.

"Splendid!" he cried. "I'll be ready when you are!" The die was cast!

It was just before eleven o'clock that night when the telephone in the apartment of Mary and Mona announced the arrival of Wentworth in the lobby. Mary asked him to come up at once. She was alone. Mona had left for a theater with Carlton shortly after a seven o'clock dinner, leaving Mary to put the finishing touches to the last act they had planned in their little drama. She received Wentworth at the door, and with a show of secrecy, conducted him through the living-room into an inner bedroom.

Wentworth glanced around him curiously and his eyes lighted as he noted a camera, and flashlight apparatus, already in position, and trained on the living-room.

"All that we need now is to wait until she and Daniels are seated at their tete-a-tete supper and then light the powder. The camera will do the rest!" chuckled Mary in apparent glee.

"And we will sell the plate to the highest bidder!" said Wentworth with a grimace which showed that he at least was in deadly earnest.

"Hush!" cautioned Mary suddenly, catching his arm, as a key turned in the hall lock. The next moment Mona and Carlton entered the suite, and the latter removed his companion's wraps with a show of tenderness, which made Wentworth smile again in anticipation. A tempting bunch of cold stands had already been set on a table. Carlton took the seat, which Mona indicated, and edged his chair closer to her, as she inspected the articles of the menu.

"Now!" whispered Mary.

Wentworth softly struck a match and dropped it into the powder, as Mary flung aside the heavy draperies, screening the entrance to the living-room. The bright flash of the powder mingled with a cry of fright from Mona—and Wentworth stepped into the outer room, smiling cynically. But his smile was suddenly frozen.

Carlton was facing him with a drawn revolver.

"Hands up!" snapped the young actor.

Wentworth whirled about—to confront a second revolver in the hands of Mary. The girl laughed at the scowl of rage on his face.

"Caught with the goods!" she mocked.

"You devil!" he growled, as Mary laughed.

"That will do!" commanded Carlton. "The game's up. We've got you fair, and we mean to hold you! We know your connection with The Tattler, and your own judgment must tell you that we have evidence enough of your blackmailing methods to send you to prison for more years than you would probably care to reckon!"

"What do you want?" growled Wentworth.

"First—Those letters of Mrs. Burton's, and next your promise to put The Tattler out of business and remove yourself from this vicinity!"

"Which means, of course, immunity from the law?" sneered Wentworth.

"Not quite!" It was Mary who spoke. "You are forgetting the expenses of the case—and the money you have made us spend to get you where we wanted you! I think five thousand would about cover it. You can give us a check. I think we can take it for granted that you won't stop payment!"

Mona stepped to the telephone and ordered a taxi-cab. The party then went to The Tattler office and recovered the letters and received the check.

Ten minutes later Mona was ringing Mrs. Burton's private telephone number from a corner drug store.

"We have your letters!" she said crisply. "Shall we mail them—or bring them up?"

"Get a taxi!" cried Mrs. Burton. And Mona laughed happily. "We will!" she promised.

THE END